

Durham Research Online

Deposited in DRO:

20 January 2021

Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Bonneau, C. and Aroles, J. (2021) 'Digital nomads: A new form of leisure class?', in Experiencing the New World of Work. , pp. 157-177.

Further information on publisher's website:

<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108865814.011>

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Chapter 7: Digital Nomads: A New Form of Leisure Class?

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Introduction

Digital nomadism refers to a mobile lifestyle through which individuals can combine work with continuous travel, as they are not tied to a fixed place of residence. It comprises a wide array of professional endeavours, ranging from corporate remote workers to freelancers and digital entrepreneurs. This work modality is distinctive in that it is also a lifestyle, i.e. a ‘distinctive and recognisable mode of living’ (Sobel 1981) that encompasses shared patterns of everyday behaviour (Cohen et al. 2015). Digital nomads frequently change destination and can, for instance, work in a coffee shop in Chiang Mai (Thailand) in April and then in a coworking space in Amsterdam the following month. Images of success, in the context of digital nomadism, are performed through various promotional discourses, which primarily gravitate around the promise of an emancipatory lifestyle, an image of apparent ease, and an ethos of conviviality to name a few. This chapter investigates the development of this promotional discourse, conveyed through the social media platforms of ‘high-profile’ digital nomads as well as their coverage by the general and specialized press.

We first examined 60 high-profile digital nomads. They clearly articulate their status as digital nomad on their public social media profiles, blogs and websites. Social media is essential to their work, or even in some cases, the foundation on which their business model is based. Indeed, many seek to generate income by maintaining a blog and social media accounts where they share their experiences and provide advice to aspiring nomads, establish product placement and advertising

partnerships with brands, or sell products and services related to nomadism (e.g. books, podcasts, mentoring, training, conferences, organized retreats, etc.). Hence, they use social media not only to build their professional identity and reputation (see Sergi and Bonneau 2016), but also to actively ‘promote’ this lifestyle. Importantly, what distinguishes these nomads from other entrepreneurs (who use social media for self-presentation) is the commodification of their life experiences. The purpose, value and uniqueness of these digital nomads’ commercial proposition rely on the promises carried through their storytelling: what they can sell and to whom depend on the story they tell. In order to do so, they must not only convince others of the value of this lifestyle, but also convey their own legitimacy as experienced digital nomads. Through the public display of their success stories on social media – as well as the coverage they receive in the general and specialized press – they contribute to the development of a ‘mainstream promotional discourse’ around digital nomadism. As Thompson (2019) showed, this discourse does not necessarily reflect the actual lived experience of all digital nomads, who also face a world of precarious employment without benefits. Yet, it exerts a steadily growing appeal on those who aspire to escape the banality of their 9 to 5 jobs, work less, earn more and enjoy life.

As we were unpacking the rhetoric underlying these digital nomads’ success stories, it became apparent that leisure, along with the freedom required to fully benefit from its hedonistic enjoyment, are the central pillars supporting their narratives. Indeed, digital nomads prioritize their leisure considerations over employment-based location (see Thompson 2019). Aside from a low cost of living, digital nomads select destinations based on their potential for tourism-related activities (e.g. sightseeing, independent exploration of the destination, local culture), self-development activities (e.g. arts, sports, yoga, meditation) and entertainment-

related activities (e.g. partying, drinking). Hence, they present digital nomadism as a way to get the freedom necessary to escape the traditional working structures that leave little time for leisure. We found the ways digital nomads articulate the centrality of leisure in their way of living reminiscent of the leisure class described by the American sociologist and economist Thorstein Veblen in 1899. For Veblen, every society has one or more elites. The social nature of the elites persists; only their historical characteristics change. In his first and most famous book, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), Veblen offers an analysis of the elites of the American society, as well as the power structures of the capitalist society that were being forged before his eyes. He acutely describes a leisure class composed by the members of business circles who monopolize and accumulate the wealth produced by the greatest number of individuals. In fact, the United States of his time were characterized by the transfer of economic power from handicraft workers to the owners of the means of production and other financiers, as well as the predominance of financial property over other forms of property. For Veblen (2009, p. 33), the term ‘leisure’ does not connote indolence or quiescence, but rather ‘non-productive consumption of time’. Belonging to the leisure class involves showing that one does not need to work, at least not in a common or laborious way, and that one has leisure time at one’s disposal.

Most digital nomads are privileged westerners who can afford to travel benefiting from their passport strength as well as the gap between their western income and the cost of living in developing countries. Such privileges and inequalities reproduce the traditional imbalance between tourists and locals (Thompson 2019). However, the power structures found at the core of digital nomadism are premised on very different canons than those benefiting the businessmen or the aristocracy studied by Veblen at the end of the nineteenth century. While the mainstream discourse of

digital nomadism carries the promises of an easy life, many struggle to generate enough income to sustain this lifestyle. Hence, our purpose here is not to compare the behaviours of today's digital nomads with those of the high-status members the American society of the late nineteenth century. Instead, we are interested in how Veblen's work can be mobilized as an analytical lens (see Brown 1999; Rojek 2000) through which we can delve deeper into digital nomadism, both as a new work manifestation and as a lifestyle. As such, our chapter sets out to explore the following question: To what extent can digital nomadism be assimilated to a new leisure class *sensu* Veblen? Considering that digital nomads might constitute the 'new faces of success' in our new world of work, we argue that Veblen's work can provide illuminating concepts in our analysis of the mainstream promotional discourse underlying digital nomadism.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, we briefly review the literature around digital nomadism in order to identify the place of leisure in this lifestyle. Second, we explain why Veblen's work is still relevant for the analysis of contemporary social issues. We then examine specific aspects of his *Theory of the Leisure Class* and show how they allowed him to propose a detailed portrait of this specific class of activities. This brief overview of Veblen's work allows us to identify four key dimensions structuring his analysis, namely Differentiation, Emulation, Visibility and Institutionalisation. After briefly presenting the methodology underlying this chapter, we use each of these four dimensions as new points of departure to extend and refine our understanding of digital nomadism. This does not lead to the identification of a new 'leisure class' *per se*, as digital nomadism is blooming in very different economic circumstances than those in which the nineteenth century's leisure class emerged. However, we conclude this chapter by discussing

how this ‘Veblen-inspired’ analysis can act as a generative source of questions not only for examining digital nomadism, but also to look at understudied aspects of the new world of work.

Digital nomadism: The promises of a leisure-driven lifestyle

In 2007, Tim Ferriss published a book entitled *The 4-hour workweek: Escape 9-5, Live Anywhere, and Join the New Rich*. In this book, the American entrepreneur and author proposes the principle of ‘geoarbitrage’, which involves relocating oneself in a country where living costs are lower in order to enjoy ‘the benefits of first-world income and developing-world cost of living’ (Elgan 2017) while working remotely. Ten years later, Chiang Mai (the largest city in northern Thailand) was named ‘the digital nomad capital of the world’, following the massive influx of digital nomads who seem to put Ferriss’ geoarbitrage principle in practice. This book, together with a series of similar endeavours, played a significant role in popularizing the digital nomad’s lifestyle. Importantly, while the term was coined more than twenty years ago (Makimoto and Manners 1997), it is only in the past few years that digital nomadism has enjoyed a higher visibility both on social media and in the general press. Importantly, it recently experienced a somehow exponential growth in the light of various technological innovations and developments, with an estimated 4.8 million digital nomads in the US in 2018 (MBO Partners 2018), thus placing digital nomadism at the centre of discussions on the future of work and new ways of working.

Nested within an ‘ecology of work practices’ transformed through the emergence of the sharing economy, collaborative entrepreneurship, flexibilisation of work and a multitude of technological innovations (see Aroles et al. 2019), digital

nomadism covers a wide array of professional endeavours. In particular, digital nomadism encompasses remote freelancers, digital entrepreneurs, employees working for companies that allow them to work from anywhere, as well as individuals engaged in a mix of these activities. Typically, digital nomads are engaged in computer programming, marketing activities, various forms of online consulting and teaching, writing & translation work, graphic designing, customer service and so on. Digital technologies afford flexibility to digital nomads with regards to where, when and how work is conducted. They also allow for the materialisation of new forms of autonomy with regards to business opportunities based on the use of these technologies. ‘On-demand’ freelancing work platforms such as Upwork, TaskRabbit and RemoteOK – the latter created by Pieter Levels, himself a digital nomad of some renown – offer independent workers new possibilities to find online work that can be carried out from anywhere. Clearly, this also creates problems in terms of the casualization of work, a lack of stability, prospects and benefits as well as diminishing workers’ protection (see Aroles et al. 2019; Bergvall-Kåreborn and Howcroft 2014; Cant 2019; Moisander et al. 2018).

While working from home or in a shared space (e.g. in a coworking space) has become relatively commonplace (see Bouncken and Reuschl 2018; Spinuzzi 2012), digital nomadism distinguishes itself in that it can be seen to constitute an extreme form of remote work. More precisely, for digital nomads, mobility and remoteness are voluntary and continuous, and not solely related to the contingencies/practicalities of their work. While mobile workers usually travel for work, digital nomads select their location based on aesthetics and leisure considerations (Müller 2016). Since their business model is based on their storytelling, exotic settings and experiences are valued. For digital nomads, tourism-related activities (e.g. sightseeing, independent

exploration of the destination and the local culture), self-development activities (e.g. arts, sports, yoga, meditation), but also entertainment-related activities (e.g. partying, drinking) constitute the main forms of leisure. But work and leisure – as well as professional and personal freedom – are more tightly connected for digital nomads than for any other types of workers, as in the case of digital nomadism, ‘one provides the means for, is impacted by, and created based upon the other and vice versa’ (Reichenberger 2018, p. 377). While tourists travel on specific holiday dates, digital nomads work while traveling (Nash et al. 2018) in a way that blends together leisure and professional commitments. Both professional and personal arrangements must give them the resources and flexibility required to afford endless travel. Some digital nomads even go beyond the idea of owning/having a fixed place to live (e.g. a permanent home address) and engage in minimalist travelling.

Digital nomadism is also characterized by temporal independence, i.e. the autonomy to choose when they want to work and for how long. For example, they often choose to work long hours on successive days to be able to take days off after, or split their days between work and leisure. Digital nomads seek to incorporate work into a whole ‘lifestyle mobility’ (Cohen et al. 2015), in which private life is an integral part of their work, and vice-versa. In sum, a ‘successful’ digital nomad is not only an individual who has achieved location independence, but also professional, technological and temporal independence (see Prester et al. 2019). This entanglement between leisure and work (or private and professional lives), together with the infatuation for digital nomadism, led to the portrayal of digital nomadism as a lifestyle in itself, with digital nomads tentatively emerging as a new class.

An overview of Veblen’s approach and proposition

In 1899, Thorstein Veblen wrote a seminal monograph describing an emerging class in the American society in the late 19th century. The strength and precision of Veblen's description of the power structures characterizing those times still has the ability to enlighten his readers today. As noted by Martha Banta in her introduction of *The Theory of the Leisure Class*' re-edition within Oxford World's Classics collection (Veblen 2009), Veblen reshaped 'economics as a cultural history of material life' (ibid, p. x). For Veblen, the economic studies (of his time) seemed to isolate the market from society. In order to take a critical look at the 'gentlemen of leisure', Veblen did not only examine their business practices – and the institutions that make them possible – but also paid attention to their social habits and everyday behaviours. The leisure class described by Veblen (2009) is made of conservative people who directly hinder change and evolution through their own inertia. For Veblen (2009), today's social relations will form the institutions of tomorrow, and will continue until new circumstances force people to change them. Hence, his analysis of the evolution of society considers features of social life that 'are not commonly classed as economic' (2009, p. 3).

His approach is marked by constant scepticism, allowing him to stay alert to 'new evidence that raised new questions' (Veblen 2009, p. xv), which were left understudied by his contemporaries at the time. Veblen's methods of scientific inquiry involved the use of data 'drawn from everyday life, by direct observation or through common notoriety' (ibid, p. 3). He often anchors his descriptions in figures or even characters (e.g. the financier, the craftsman, etc.). As these methods were unusual at the time, he was accused of illustrating rather than demonstrating. But his sharp verve and argumentative strategies are powerful and serve well his three main objectives, namely to depict the general structures of a given society, to identify the

social relationships and behaviours they generate and to show their impact on consumption. In line with others (see for example Brown 1999; Hillman 2009; Rojek 2000; Scott 2010), we argue that the principles that guided Veblen's analysis of the leisure class remain relevant to understand the economic and cultural foundations of contemporary socio-economic phenomena. More specifically, we contend that four key dimensions, which are central in his work, might inform our own analysis of work-related practices: (i) Differentiation, (ii) Emulation, (iii) Visibility and (iv) Institutionalisation.

1. Differentiation. For Veblen, the rise of the leisure class is a direct consequence of the ancient distinction between honourable activities that were once classified as exploits (e.g. priestly activities, government, warfare and sports), and productive work, in which 'impecunious members of the community habitually put forth their efforts' (2009, p. 218). Hence, one line of demarcation between the leisure class and the general body of the working classes is based on the nature of their respective occupations. For the gentlemen of leisure, to be seen carrying out productive work – referred to as industrial work – is to be lowered in terms of social esteem. Hence, the members of the leisure class sought to be exempted from industrial employment, as this exemption was the economic expression of their superior rank. Veblen (2009) also described the types of leisure behaviours attributable to these elites in contrast to those associated with traditional and mass culture. The leisure activities of the upper bourgeoisie of the time were based on the culture of aesthetic qualities, the acquisition of which was intended only as an honorary distinction. The sumptuousness of the celebrations it holds and the sophistication of their entertainment activities essentially serve the purpose of distinguishing itself advantageously as part of the economic elite.

2. Emulation. At the core of Veblen's theory lies the conceptualisation of consumption as a form of status seeking. The gentleman of leisure compares himself with others and seeks to outperform them in the acquisition of wealth and to display this in various socially approved activities. Hence, the behaviours of the members of the leisure class were motivated by a desire to do better than those with whom they classify themselves. The members of the leisure class of the late nineteenth century rated and graded themselves and others in respect of their relative opulence. Veblen's second chapter, 'Pecuniary Emulation', delves deeper into the consequences of the aspiration to emulate the status held by others. Emulation creates needs that will never be fully met since they are measured by the wealth and honour of others. Hence, the end of effort became the achievement of a favourable comparison with other men. These efforts were guided by various canons of reputability that should be observed. For example, what was considered beautiful was what served no industrial end, for example, domestic animals that had no useful purpose or expensive goods that had no direct utility served the emulative end of consumption. For the leisure class to serve as a reference model for others, their behaviours, wealth and power needed to be visible to others (Veblen 2009).

3. Visibility. Leisure (i.e. non-productive consumption of time) is an evidence of the economic surplus value of rich families. However, leisure is not always performed in public and does not always leave a material trace. Hence, other means must be found to put leisure in evidence. The leisure class' members portrayed by Veblen (2009) cultivated good manners, habits of decorum and aesthetic faculty, which were ostensible signs of their wealth (and described by Veblen as 'conspicuous leisure'). They also consumed valuable goods for appearance. They spend money in valuable presents, expensive feasts and entertainments and other noble goods as an evidence of

their wealth (what Veblen referred to as ‘conspicuous consumption’): ‘he becomes a connoisseur in creditable viands of various degrees of merit, in manly beverages and trinkets, in seemly apparel and architecture, in weapons, games dancers and the narcotics’ (Veblen 2009, p. 53). This competition through visible consumption generates an endless demand and therefore constitutes the most powerful driver of economic life itself. Learning how to live a life of ostensible leisure also has effects on consumption.

4. Institutionalisation. Developing the ‘right’ habits of thought and cultivating the aesthetic faculty characterizing the leisure class required time and application. These learning efforts, as well as the teaching endeavour that it involved, were required to ensure the transition of the leisure class to its next ‘stage of culture’ (Veblen 2009, p. 30). As time goes by, a large proportion of the leisure class has been consistently exempt from work for a generation or more, and has obtained a ‘social confirmation’ within the class itself. This ‘select class’ ‘is large enough to form and sustain an opinion in matters of taste’ (ibid, p. 91) and to prescribe its manner of life and its standards of worth. These standards constituted the ‘point of departure for a new move in advance in the same direction’ (ibid, p. 63), and their observance does not only happen within the leisure class itself, but also ‘carries the force of prescription for all classes below it’ (ibid, p. 71). Poorer people also wanted to emulate the rich by reproducing their consumption behaviours.

Even though the mainstream discourse about digital nomadism promotes very different values and ideals than those pertaining to the 19th century leisure class, there are a number of aspects that can be investigated using these four key dimensions. The following section briefly describes our methods.

Methodological approach

Our research adopted a qualitative approach to content analysis and drew from several types of online sources. The data collection was conducted in two phases. First, the exploration of popular nomad-oriented forums and groups and the systematic search for related media coverage in the general press allowed us to identify 60 high-profile digital nomads. In order to be included in our study, each individual had to meet the following criteria: (i) be a self-identified “digital nomad”; (ii) monetize their nomad status in some way and (iii) publicly share their experiences online. Hence, we focus on digital nomads who make themselves visible on social media, as well as those who are frequently featured in media stories (and not necessarily on the more successful ones, in terms of revenue or longevity). Second, we closely examined these selected nomads’ ‘visibility ecosystems’, namely their publicly available social media accounts (Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and blogs). We documented several aspects such as gender, age range, career field, number of years into the digital nomad lifestyle, education, professional experience, lifestyle, frequency and duration of travel, their pitch, and so on. In addition, we collected photos posted by each digital nomad, thus mirroring the increasingly visual culture on social media (Hand 2012), where images are as much a part of human communication as text or speech (Miller and Sinanan 2017).

Our data analysis process also involved two main phases. First, we performed a manual thematic coding of the data collected in an open and inductive manner (Miles et al. 2013). This not only involved examining closely the professional journey of these digital nomads but also unpacking the narratives upon which digital nomads craft their digital selves as well as the aesthetics carried by the images. Therefore, our analysis considered both the visual and textual elements of posts, using the

descriptions, hashtags and comments to contextualize the pictures (Latzko-Toth et al. 2017). This first round of coding allowed us to formulate a series of first-order codes that captured the essence of our data, including: the activities through which digital nomads can monetize and professionalize their experience (teaching, conferences, influencing, community building, etc.), the values and aesthetics conveyed by their discourse (freedom, autonomy, wellness, adventure, meaningfulness, self-development, work-life balance, etc.) and the components on which rely their storyline (a 'younger generation-specific' vision, the refusal to make compromise, the 'do-it-yourself ethos, etc.). We then crafted our second-order constructs by examining our first-order codes with the lens provided by the four dimensions we have extracted from Veblen's work. This process allowed us to draw connections between our emerging analytical paths. Altogether, this enabled us to better understand the specificities of digital nomadism, to characterize the digital nomads' 'canons of reputability' and to show how they somehow regulate their scheme of life and those of aspiring digital nomads.

Analysing the mainstream discourse on digital nomadism

Differentiation. Contrary to the leisure class described by Veblen (2009), digital nomads do not differentiate themselves from other classes of workers on the basis of their professional occupations. Indeed, the mainstream discourse of digital nomadism features, we argue, two other forms of differentiations, one from corporate workers and the other from previous generations. Digital nomads want to be exempted from what they characterize as the 'soul-less corporate 9 to 5 life', which in their view is not honourable. Time spent on a regular job in a cubicle with 'only 10 days vacation a year' is not only unworthy, but also comes with obstacles to the freedom and

autonomy. Traditional work settings, where employees work for others, are presented as incompatible with self-development. Hence, digital nomads see themselves as nonconformist digital workers who diverge from the path followed by the majority. They refuse to make compromises and to accept imposed choices:

‘We 9-to-5 escape artists choose to defy the status quo because it doesn’t work for us. Something in our very nature fights against mediocrity and working our asses off so someone else can achieve their goals. We have our own goals in mind. We wake up every day with the intention of creating our best lives because we have only one life, and it’s with a pre-set amount of days.’

This differentiation clearly appears in the ideological and aesthetic underpinnings of emancipation and non-conformism found in the mainstream narrative surrounding digital nomadism. For digital nomads, it is not so much ‘doing work’ that is the problem, but ‘doing work that is meaningless’. Hence, they are not rejecting work *per se*, but they seek to contrast their experience with traditional employment. Elements associated with entrepreneurial values – such as breaking the rules, opposing authority, going for full autonomy, do-it-yourself ethos – are put forward in their discourses.

Furthermore, digital nomads are also aiming for technological, geographical, and temporal independence (Prester et al. 2019). The combination of these different forms of independence provides them with more freedom to pursue leisure activities and self-development. In the narrative of their experience, they put forward a different way of enacting the interplay of work and leisure, which is said to be driven by an underlying intrinsic motivation to find a balance and live a more fulfilling and purposeful life. Their lifestyle is presented as a form of reaction to ideals and imperatives that are dominant in the corporate world: *‘After some years working in*

the corporate world, I realized that I found intolerable just everything about it, and in particular having to attend interminable soul-crushing meetings and to work on other people's silly project'.

This narrative contributes to the creation of a demarcation between insiders (digital nomads), who are passionate about 'living their dreams' and outsiders (corporate workers), who are 'trapped by their comfort and safe in their mediocrity'. Hence, leisure is seen as a way to live life to the fullest. But digital nomads are not only differentiating themselves from other types of workers, but also from previous generations. They no longer tolerate habits of thought formed in the past and therefore consider their lifestyle as an evolution in comparison to the path taken by their parents. Indeed, the conversion to nomadic lifestyle does not only involve the adoption of a new way of working, but often entails embracing new life choices. Their stories convey a 'younger generation-specific' view on work-life balance which relies on the excitement, adventures and inherent challenges that come with travel and prioritizes well-being in all aspects of life; *'(...) our generation is sick of being treated like unidimensional beings that are expected to show up to an office from nine to five, five days a week, 365 days a year (...) There is no work/life balance. There is life and there is life.'*

Emulation. Veblen (2009) indicates that the habit of making comparison acts as an incentive for others to (re)direct their energy in a way that would allow them to live up to that ideal. For digital nomads, the value is derived neither from ownership and possession, but rather from individual, self-centred fulfilment and happiness. These characteristics result from their behaviours, preferences and goals. It is the manifestations of moral, physical and aesthetic values related to this ideal that form

the ‘standard of life’ on which comparison can be based (ibid, p. 67). The high-profile digital nomad success stories are efficient means of emulation. They gratify their authors’ sense of legitimacy, while informing other nomads (and people aspiring to this lifestyle) about the necessary conditions of reputability defining success within digital nomads’ scheme of life. As also noted by Hillman (2009) in his study of the backpacker subculture, which shares many similarities with digital nomadism, this shows a contradiction between conformity (the desire to copy successful nomads to build one’s standing) and independence (the glorification of autonomy as a symbol of success). Like backpackers, digital nomads may believe that they are free from the emulation process, but many ‘appear to be almost clones of the others’ (Hillman 2009, p. 167).

Sustaining a life of travel while working online is the goal to achieve. With digital nomads, favourable comparison is achieved through the degree of freedom, location independence, flexibility and wellness obtained in comparison to others. As Veblen (2009) explains, the standard that guide our efforts is not the average lifestyle achieved, but an ‘ideal that lies just beyond our reach’ (ibid, p. 71). In the same manner, the digital nomad’s lifestyle does not seem considerably in advance or unattainable, but reachable by anyone with the right mind. This idea is reinforced by the promotional discourse of high-profile digital nomads that gravitates around empowerment and self-discovery: *‘Anyone can live a freedom lifestyle if they want it badly enough. They just need the guidance and support from others who have “been there and done that”.’*

They set out to motivate others to become nomads by showing the actions needed to emulate their success and by convincing them that this is not only a sustainable mode of life, but that it is accessible to anyone with the right mind:

'Follow my journey and be inspired. I am truly passionate about helping people learn how to become digital nomads. There is always a way to make it happen so send me an e-mail and an excuse and I will give you a solution'.

Visibility. For digital nomads, leisure is 'the motor that sustains modern life' (Blackshaw 2018, p. 79), and therefore is not performed with the unique goal of providing visible manifestations of wealth. However, in order to gain the esteem of others, high-profile digital nomads must make their freedom and success visible to others. In their case, it is not so much about the public display of their accumulated wealth, but about the public display of specific markers of their lifestyle on social media: *'This is what we had dreamed of doing – and we were actually pulling it off! From country to country we have lived a luxurious lifestyle while working mere hours a day (on the days we decided to work at all) and we did so while sipping cocktails poolside.'*

Continuous connectivity and hyper-mobility inevitably lead to the consumption of ever-new products, gadgets and services, and those are registered as 'markers' of a digital nomad's lifestyle. But it is more the embeddedness of their leisure activities as a crucial part of their lifestyle that is displayed as proofs of the level of freedom they achieved. Through their social media traces, they communicate their accomplishments. They narrate their personal and professional stories, the reasons that led them to become nomads, how they transformed their lives to reach this goal, and how they achieved success. As explained by Humphreys (2018, p. 12), these practices of 'media accounting' provide evidence for and explanation of their presence, existence and action as digital nomads. The narratives of high-profile digital nomads are built around proofs of their achievements (e.g. by sharing detailed monthly income report). Observers have no other means of judging their reputability

and legitimacy as digital nomads than through this display of their lifestyle on social media.

The images that accompany their discourse must not be seen as mere illustrations, but as true anchors serving to materialize and give life to this lifestyle. It is enacted on social media through the documentation of the numerous location visited, which are not only presented in a ‘I was here’ fashion, but also in ways that clearly show that travelling is performed on a long-term or permanent basis, and not bracketed off from their ‘regular’ life. Photos of the work settings – usually set in places generally considered unusual for work that is conducted on a computer – are also used as tangible evidence to convince others that they truly achieved location-independent work. Taken together, these photos and stories contribute to the popularization of a certain aesthetic of digital nomadism that is necessary to convey the associated values of freedom, wellness and adventure. They also largely contribute to the ‘romantization’ of digital nomadism, since these digital accounts often convey what is desirable about the digital nomad’s lifestyle. They orient on a more symbolic level how aspiring digital nomads should conceive this lifestyle and how they should embody it: *‘I will take you through stories that I learned through my experiences and frames that I froze, for you to get a better picture of your next endeavour.’*

Institutionalisation. While digital nomadism is portrayed as an alternative to mainstream forms of work, it has become increasingly institutionalized, in part due to the business activities of some of the high-profile DNs who realized that they could monetize their experience by focusing on the material and professional needs of less experienced individuals (see Aroles et al. 2020). Some high-profile digital nomads

help others achieve their own goals through coaching sessions, online courses, training programs, mentoring sessions and ‘how-to’ guides. Through their ‘educational’ stance, these digital nomads seek to highlight how digital nomadism can be learnt/taught, just like any other profession: *‘We want to share with you all we have gleaned. We have helped hundreds of people customize and live out their own freedom lifestyles. We also offer online courses for people looking to grow a profitable online business they can easily and successfully run from anywhere in the world.’*

They monetize their vast experience as digital nomads into practical methods and resources in the form of books, podcasts, YouTube channels and public speaking. In particular, this can, for instance, involve organizing various events aimed specifically at the digital nomad community (e.g. conferences, workshops, cruises, camps, retreats, festivals and summits), such as DNX, the first digital nomad conference now held annually in English, Spanish and German). The founders – a vegan couple who escaped the corporate world of Düsseldorf and Berlin to become nomadic entrepreneurs – draw from their own previous experience as confirmed nomads to advice and encourage others to become digital nomads, like themselves.

Other high-profile digital nomads also provide access to certain networks of highly-successful individuals and constructed communities where like-minded individuals can transform their life together, as illustrated in the following quote describing 30-day international coworking retreats: *‘We realized we were building an open and creative community where people could dive into their life in an unstructured way. We wanted to shift people’s outlook towards space and time and their routine.’*

Some present themselves as the gatekeepers of exclusive experiences that are not necessarily open to anyone interested; a thorough selection process is often involved to make sure that the participants match precise criteria or correspond to a pre-defined profile. For example, a nomad limits the access to his ‘gastronomad’ experiences to only ten ‘adventurous foodies’. Other organizers clearly define their targeted attendees in the description of their events, as shown in the following quote: *‘[Our retreat] is for the unconventional misfit, the graduated backpacker, the passionately curious. It is a home for those that prioritize the acceleration of their potential.’*

Usually held in breath-taking locations, these events come at a price. For instance, the different access packages for a major digital nomad annual conference range from 197 to 997 euros per person. The languages and prices of these events also inform about the intended audience. They create a comfortable bubble where privileged westerners pay to gather with people of similar demographics and recreate the conditions of a ‘Western environment’ in developing nations (Thompson 2019). As illustrated by the following quote describing a ‘workation’ all-inclusive package, turn-key solutions are available for those who are willing to invest in the ‘acquisition’ of this curated lifestyle: *‘Traveling with us is the best way to immerse yourself in new cultures without losing sight of your career, business, or personal project. When you travel with us, you live a life you don't need a vacation from.’*

While the values and ideals promoted by high-profile digital nomads substantially diverge from those of the leisure class described by Veblen (2009), they share some similarities with regards to cultural aspects. In a similar fashion than the leisure class, these successful individuals have been enacting the digital nomad’s lifestyle long enough to obtain a ‘social confirmation’ within the digital nomad tribe

itself. These normative networks, preferred places, special events and constructed communities are positioned as quasi-mandatory passage points in the process of becoming a fully-fledged digital nomad (Aroles et al. 2020). The strategies that are shared by their organizers and participants (e.g. how to make money online and sustain long-term travel) determine exemplar patterns of behaviour for aspiring nomads, and therefore, contribute to the institutionalization of digital nomadism.

Discussion and conclusions

Digital nomadism is not only a new technology-enabled form of work, it is also an economic activity and a sociocultural phenomenon in itself. The mainstream discourse surrounding digital nomadism goes hand in hand with the profound changes taking place in contemporary capitalism, including the pervasive relevance of enterprise culture (Du Gay 1996; Vallas and Cummins 2015), as well as the ‘myth of glamorized millennial labor’, where Internet provides access to boundless opportunities (Rosenblat 2018).

In this chapter, we argued that some observations can be made about the character of emulation and conspicuous leisure practice encountered in digital nomadism today. Although Veblen (2009) recognized emulation is practiced across all socio-economic levels, he acknowledged that the attitudes and behaviours deemed respectable may vary through time. For digital nomads, the basis of esteem does not revolve around the accumulation of goods or the possession of wealth, like in the pecuniary culture described by Veblen. Indeed, most of them cannot be considered as high status travellers and are actually proud of themselves when it comes to their ability to obtain ‘best value for money’ travel arrangements (Hillman 2009). Their reputability is based on their self-made character and their capacity to show increased autonomy and control over one’s life, as compared to corporate workers and previous

generations. High-profile digital nomads have to demonstrate tangible evidence that they are exempt from 9-to-5 forms of employment. By publicly displaying their mobile lifestyle, they distance themselves from traditional workers whose life are deemed undesirable. Their ‘badges of honour’ are materialized in the form of lists of destinations, aesthetic pictures and online diaries. Their constant movements between countries can be used to impress others and prove their legitimacy. By making these visible on social media, they also propagate particular standards of living and contribute to the popularization of certain places, events and communities.

While each period brings its fair share of novelty, difference and innovation, various periods can be premised on similar logics that are repeated over time and simply presented in a different manner. For that reason, we contend that seminal theories, such as Veblen’s, can act as a generative source of questions to examine contemporary phenomena, including digital nomadism. Veblen showed that the study of economic phenomena cannot be carried out without an understanding of cultural structures and social values. His portrait of the leisure class suggests ways to distinguish different forms of work-related activities and situate them in a broader framework of analysis. In line with others (see for example Brown 1999; Hillman 2009; Rojek 2000; Scott 2010), we argue that Veblen’s work is still highly relevant in the exploration of various facets of modern work, economic sociology and work-leisure phenomena.

Through his analysis, Veblen (2009) detects the presence of economic grounds in the leisure class’s accepted canons of taste and shows their impact on consumption behaviours. Drawing from our own analysis of the manifestations of digital nomadism, we showed that there currently is a whole set of economic activities based on the ‘selling of a dreamed work/lifestyle’ by one section of the digital nomads’

group who show their dominance over others. Therefore, aspiring digital nomads can achieve their desired status via high-profile digital nomads who have already achieved the status they seek. Carefully curated images of ‘work that doesn’t seem like work’ allow them to construct the digital nomad lifestyle as a commodity that can simply be ‘purchased from them’. This offering of goods and services targeting aspiring digital nomads meets their ‘demand for the honorific element’ (Veblen 2009, p. 104), but are also pivotal in sustaining the sellers’ own dream. As Thompson (2019, p. 38) notes, these commercial activities ‘becomes almost like a pyramid scheme of selling the dream to the next group of aspirants in order to fund another’s lifestyle’. As Veblen observed, standards for emulation are ever changing, meaning that current goods and services currently considered reputable will be challenged as new standards arise (Scott 2010). Indeed, maintaining an enviable position in a community requires constant efforts. Hence, the emulation of desirable work profiles and lifestyle generates other drivers of economic life itself. Further research could look into how the ideals shaping the new world of work fluctuate over time and create an endless demand from individuals who have not yet had access to it.

The mainstream discourse on the digital nomad’s lifestyle contributes to the creation of a new symbol of the future of work: aspiring digital nomads accept as their ideal the digital nomads’ scheme of life, and endeavour to live up to that ideal. However, achieving and sustaining constant mobility is a challenge and not everyone carries equal chances of ‘making it’. At some point, even the most convinced nomads realize that their quest for a leisure-driven lifestyle actually means that they are always working while travelling. Some might switch to a slower travel speed or even decide to return into a more ‘traditional lifestyle’ after facing too many difficulties (e.g. lack of resources) or feeling the need for a more stable lifestyle (e.g. when

children become part of the equation). Additionally, growing environmental awareness might lead to a more direct questioning of the sustainability of such a lifestyle, especially considering the carbon emissions associated with air travel. This raises the question of whether digital nomadism is not simply a transitional ‘leisure-based’ phase rather than an enduring transformation that can be sustained over the whole course of one’s life. Future work could use a longitudinal and processual approach to study the various stages shaping the new trajectories of extreme mobile work.

Alongside the mainstream discourse presented in this chapter, we must note that there are also several digital nomads who criticise these narratives and try to present a more nuanced view of this lifestyle, by sharing their difficulties and warning others of the scams and traps they will find on their path. They also uncover different motivations for adopting the ‘geoarbitrage’ principle as an ‘economic coping strategy’ (Thompson 2019, p. 28) for young people crushed by massive student loan debt, no local job opportunities and high rent. Yet, these voices describing a world of precarious employment without benefits are, more often than not, eclipsed by the optimistic ‘mainstream narratives’ depicting digital nomadism as an empowering and fulfilling life. As such, it becomes even more important to study digital nomadism ‘in practice’ in order to explore what is not accounted for or reported in the ‘mainstream narratives’ that depict and frame digital nomadism. Researchers could investigate the challenges that other digital nomads face as they seek to distance themselves from the image propagated by the mainstream narratives. This would involve exploring, for instance, the following questions: To what extent do digital nomads recognize themselves in these mainstream narratives? How does their own experience of digital nomadism differ from these stories? Do they consider that these narratives contribute

to the stigmatization of their lifestyle and harm their own image as nomads? These questions remain to be explored in order to continue the reflection opened in this chapter.

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